

Transcription: Daniel Frizzell

Good morning. Today is Tuesday, May 20, 2014. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Mr. Daniel Ray Frizzell. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Mr. Frizzell is at his home in Odessa, Texas, and I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas. Sir, thank you very much for taking the time to let us interview you today. It's an honor for us and for our program.

Daniel Frizzell: It's an honor for me too.

Yes sir. Sir, the first question that I always start with in these interviews is please just tell us a little bit about your childhood and your life before you went into the Navy.

Daniel Frizzell: Well, I was raised in Starks, Louisiana. World War II started and everything was going good, and in 1945, early '45, my daddy decided to buy a grocery store in Orange, Texas. We moved, pulled up and moved over to Orange, and I started back to school and wasn't doing real good. Wasn't happy, you know, with the big change, so I wanted to get in the service. So I decided, well, I want to join the Navy. Somebody said, "Well, you ain't old enough." At that time, I was 15 years old. So I come up with the idea that I could go to the draft board and draft, sign up for the draft, and then take my draft card and go and join the Navy. So I went to the draft board and the young lady said, "What's your name?" And I told her. She said, "How old are you?" I said, "Well, I'm 18." "When was your birthday?" I said, "Today." So anyway, I took the draft card and I went to Beaumont, Texas, and enlisted in the Navy and got everything signed up. My mother wasn't real happy but my daddy said, "Well, if that's what you're going to do, go ahead and do a good job of it." So I got signed up and they sent me to San Diego to boot camp. I went through boot camp and got leave. And when I went back from leave, they assigned me to the USS Pensacola which is a heavy cruiser. That ship was destined to go to the atomic bomb test at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. So we took off from Long Beach, California, and we went to Hawaii and spent a couple of weeks, and then went on down to Bikini. We anchored the ship and we worked on the ship just like we were going to be there forever, you know. When they got ready for the test, they put us on troop ships. And the first bomb that they dropped exploded 200 feet in the air. We could not look. We had to turn our backs to it. We were, I think, 25 or 30 miles from it. The bomb went off and we could look. After that, they washed the ships with sea water for a couple of weeks, I guess. Then we went over to the ship and I put on canvas clothes and shoes, and I had a Geiger counter and I went on board ship and went across the deck and went down into a compartment and looked around and it looked like a tornado went in through there. And came back out and told 'em what I saw. And so, then we went back to the troop ship and, I don't know, I can't remember for sure, but three or four weeks later, they brought in a bomb and put it six feet under the water in the center of all of these ships. And exploded it. Watched that one. And we got to see the big mushroom. We stayed another month, I guess, and then they took us back and I went back to Long Beach. From there, they assigned me to the USS Atlanta which was up at Terminal Island in San Francisco. I stayed on that and some way, somebody . . . I guess I let it slip how old I was and I guess one of my superiors, I don't know which one it was said, "You need to tell the captain of the ship before he finds out and maybe something may not be right."

Let me ask you, sir. Going back to the start there. Did you have any brothers that had gone in the military before you?

Daniel Frizzell: I was the only child.

Only child. What was it, do you think, that attracted you to the Navy, of all the branches of service?

Daniel Frizzell: Well, I had an uncle that was in the Navy and was on a submarine. All through the war, you know the main part of the war, most of the time we didn't hear from him. Didn't know where he was or anything. I had an uncle that was in the Army. He was in the Philippines. The rest of the uncles was working in the oil fields and stuff where they did not have to be drafted or anything. One of my uncles worked on the railroad. My daddy worked in the shipyard at Orange, Texas. They built destroyer escorts at that shipyard there. And he was the main man on the big pipe bender that bent all the pipe and everything that went in the ship.

And he was supportive of you going in the Navy, but your mom, I guess, you said was a little apprehensive?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yeah, like I say, I guess I got a little out of hand or whatever made me. But he said, "I think that's what you need to do," you know. So, anyway . . .

What was it like when you arrived in boot camp? Was that your first time away from home?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yes sir, sure was.

So you went to the training center there in San Diego.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah.

Tell us what your memories are of that place, what that was like.

Daniel Frizzell: Well, it was pretty hectic. We got there and they told us to take off all of our clothes except what we had on. Take everything we had and ship it home. That was in late November, early December, and it was not real cold but it got cold. For about a week we didn't get our uniforms or anything, and then finally we got them. I did real well, I thought. We had some other young men that didn't do too good, but I did everything that they told me to do. Even had one lieutenant tell me I needed to go shave. I don't know what I shaved but I went and shaved.

Was that the first time you'd ever shaved?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yes sir. But anyway, when I was in there they gave me tests to see where you went in as an apprentice seaman. They gave you tests to see what you were going to be qualified to do. And I'd always wanted to be a machinist. Well, when I got older, my daddy had always told us that machinist is a good trade. And I told them that, that I wanted to be a machinist. So anyway, I ended up in what they call the fireman training which is a motor machinist's mate to start out with. Took all the training they had and when I went on the ship, I was assigned to the engine room where all the big engines, and we changed the oil and filters and all that kind of stuff.

So it was something that you actually wanted to do then?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, it fit right in, and so, you know, and then . . . I think I went through it pretty well. I did pretty good except one night, one of the men that was actually from my hometown, was at boot camp, and he was leaving to go on leave. Well, it wasn't time for me to go yet. Kind of had a bad night that night, you know, but other than that, I did real well.

And so when you graduated, the first ship they put you on was then was the Pensacola?

Daniel Frizzell: Yes sir.

What was that like? Do you remember what it was like the first day you went aboard that ship?

Daniel Frizzell: It was awesome. That USS Pensacola, they don't make heavy cruisers like that anymore, but it had ten 16-inch guns. Five on the front and five on the back. And it was a monster, I thought, a monstrous ship. And of course, they assigned you and we had two engine rooms and two boiler rooms, and I was assigned to the after engine room, and I learned quite a bit.

Tell us, sir, what the other sailors on the ship were like. Any that stand out to you.

Daniel Frizzell: They were all from all over the country. I remember one guy from, I think he was from Brooklyn, and the World Series started and he was pulling for Brooklyn, and of course, me being from Louisiana, I thought, "I'm going to pull for the St. Louis Cardinals." That was a big thing going on, you know, with that. Everybody got along good. Really an experience really.

Yeah. That's great. And what was the typical day like aboard the ship, if there was one for you? Did you work 12-hour shifts?

Daniel Frizzell: No, you worked four on, and sometimes four on and four off, sometimes four on and eight off. Your four hours you were in the engine room when we were underway, and every so many hours you had to switch the oil filters and just check for all the stuff that was going on. And I learned real quick, you know, just look for steam leaks.

So I imagine it was pretty hot and loud in the engine room.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yeah it was. It wasn't as bad as the boiler room. It had two engine rooms and two boiler rooms and I had to go to the boiler room a couple of times and it was really hot there. So I didn't want to go in that, you know.

I'll bet. Yes sir. So when you were aboard the Pensacola, where were things in relation to the war? Because I know you went in in 1945.

Daniel Frizzell: The war was just over, you know.

The war had just ended.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, it had just ended and of course they were still taking everybody that would go. Signed up, volunteers, and drafted, and so I guess that's the reason I got in so easy, you know.

So were you in boot camp when the war . . . Where were you when the war ended?

Daniel Frizzell: We were living in Orange, Texas.

You were living in Orange. Okay. So when you finally got shipped off to boot camp the war had just ended. And I know there were a lot of troops coming home at that point because they had been gone, and they had the point system. So for you, you going in allowed some of those guys to come back home at that point.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yeah, that was, I guess, part of the reason that they were trying to get 'em all, that had been overseas and through all of that, back.

Sure. Sure. You were talking earlier, sir, about Bikini Atoll and the tests they did there with the atomic bombs. What did they tell you about that when you went down there?

Daniel Frizzell: They really didn't tell us a whole lot. They just said, "We're gonna take all of these ships and it's gonna be lined up like a big armada of ships going across the ocean." They had battle ships, they had, I think, the USS Arkansas was there. It was an older ship, you know, had a lot of older ships, and they had a Japanese battleship, and they had a German heavy cruiser that they'd captured. And it was anchored there. It was awesome to see all of the ships that were just settin' there, you know. We stayed on 'em, like I say, for, I don't know, two or three months, mostly not doing anything, you know. When you anchored you just sat. I remembered that we played pinochle a lot, you know, but you had your watches to stand. They did run the generators and stuff like that.

Did you know that you were going to get to see and be part of a test of the atomic bomb?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, they told us after we got out there. Well, somewhere along the line, I don't remember exactly when, but when we left Long Beach, somewhere right after that we were told that that's where we were going.

Describe, sir, if you could, what that day was like when you finally did the test and got to see the famous mushroom cloud and that sort of thing.

Daniel Frizzell: Well, the first one, you know, we of course wanted to see it. But they exploded it up in the air and I don't know if they thought we would hurt our eyes. I don't know if they knew what would happen.

Sure.

Daniel Frizzell: But anyway, when it went off, then we could turn and that cloud was just huge, huge, and went, you know, looked like forever up. And then I don't remember, a couple of months seemed like, before we did the other one. We could watch it and when that bomb went off and that water come up, and I know you've seen it, everybody's seen it on newsreels and stuff, it was just something that you'll never forget, you know.

Did you feel the shockwave from the blast?

Daniel Frizzell: No, we didn't feel no . . . We were far enough away that we did not feel anything.

Just saw it.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Years later I was at a movie and . . . Back when they still had newsreels, and all of a sudden, they were testing some kind of new weapons and there was my USS Pensacola settin' out there still at Bikini. And they were going to use these new weapons to, I guess, blow it up. And that's the last of ever heard of it.

Interesting. I guess they used it for a test and scuttled it.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. You know, after that, it was no good. They said that some of the radiation stuff was splashed on it, it'd be a hundred years before we could live on it, you know. Only thing I remember, it seemed like, when I went across the deck of that ship and went back, after I got out of the Navy, the bottom of my feet burned. Seemed like they burned. And I wasn't able to . . . And then it quit so I never did think no more about it.

Geez. How long then, sir, did you stay in the Navy? I believe you said you got out, the card you sent me, in 1947?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, I got out in . . . Actually, I spent about . . . I signed up for two years and when they found out how old I was, they gave me an honorable discharge with all the benefits. And I got out in, I don't remember, '47. And then I had told the captain of the ship, when I got out, that I was going to go back and get my GED, and that I was going to trade school to learn to be a machinist. So when I got out, I went to McNeese State University in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and took the test, got my GED, and then I went to Southwest Louisiana Trade School for two years and learned to be a machinist.

That's great. So when you got out of the Navy had you even turned 18 yet?

Daniel Frizzell: No. I was 17.

Wow. That's pretty remarkable to be that young.

Daniel Frizzell: And a lot of people, you know, that I just . . . And I've read stories since then. Well, I know from Starks, Louisiana, we had a young boy that was 14 and run away from home and joined the Army. And I know that when they heard where he was . . . He was in Germany right in the middle of the fight and his brother and his daddy got him sent home.

I think at that point the need was so great for troops that as long as you looked old enough and you wanted to go, they would let you go. It's pretty remarkable. Just like the fact that you said you went in and she asked when your birthday was and you told her it was that day, and they just put it down.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. I don't remember, it was November the something, and I don't remember, I have to look back on my records to see what date it was.

So when you got out of the Navy, what did you do next at that point? You were still really young.

Daniel Frizzell: Well, I went to the Veterans Administration and got signed up to go to school and school didn't start until September. And so I worked at different things. They had a deal they called the "Fifties." Fifty-two Twenty, I think. You got 20 dollars a week for 52 weeks.

Okay.

Daniel Frizzell: Well I signed up for that, but then I took a little job up at a, what they called a box factory. It was where they made veneer for boxes out of wood. But it was hard work and it wasn't paying any much more that what the Fifty-two Twenty saw. I thought, "I ain't gonna do this. I can go draw my fifty-two twenty. Well, they wouldn't let me do that, so anyway, I had to go to work. I did, you know, odd jobs until I started school.

Tell us, sir, what it was like when you got back home. I'm sure your mom was relieved that you were back after being gone for a couple of years.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Well, everybody was glad to see me, you know, and, you know, talked about it and told 'em what all happened, and that was about it. My cousins all decided I didn't talk right. Being from Louisiana, I'd been in California too long. They said, "You don't talk like Louisiana anymore."

They thought you'd lost your accent?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, that was one of those kind of amazing kind of remember, you know.

I was going to ask you sir, how did you end up in Odessa?

Daniel Frizzell: Well, I was married and I got divorced. And knew a young lady in Odessa and we met and talked some and just started courtin'. And that's where she was from, is from Odessa, and we ended up . . . I worked for a city service oil company and they went bankrupt in 1980, '82 it was. And so I lost my job there. So we moved around and ended up out here.

Okay, great. And then I understand . . . Are you going to be part of the honor flight coming up soon?

Daniel Frizzell: Yes sir. Been selected for that and one of the greatest thrills I've had that me and my wife . . . What my wife likes about it, she gets to be my guardian, and she says, "I will take care of things on that."

That's a great organization.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, they do great work.

When are you going to go? Is that in September?

Daniel Frizzell: September the 17th, 18th, and 19th.

That's great. Have you ever been to Washington, D.C., before?

Daniel Frizzell: No sir.

I think it will be a real thrill then. Not only to see the World War II Memorial but I believe you'll probably also see the other memorials there and see the capitol and that sort of thing. That'll be great. That'll be a really neat experience, I know.

Daniel Frizzell: It is and I want to see the Korean one because I had a boy I went to school with got killed in Korea, and maybe I can see his name.

Yeah, the Korean Memorial is right near there, and of course, the Vietnam Memorial is the one that has names on a wall. The other ones I don't think have names but they're very good memorials.

Daniel Frizzell: Don't have names. Okay.

And then, of course, you're right there with the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. I think, if you get a chance, you might be able to see the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery in that same area.

Daniel Frizzell: That would be great, yeah.

The Marine Memorial which is also right across the river. That sir, will be, I'm sure, an outstanding trip, and it's great that you were chosen to get to do that.

Daniel Frizzell: Well, what amazes me is that all my expenses are going to be paid and my wife can go and be with me and the cost for her is only sixteen hundred dollars for plane, hotels, and everything, and that is really an honor, you know. And I understand that they're going to try to organize another flight I think early next year for the Permian Basin and they're going to try to get all the Vietnam veterans that they can to go on that one because of the way they were received when they came back. I think that would be a great thing.

That would. How did they find you? Or how did you find out about the flight?

Daniel Frizzell: Well, it was on the news. They had, you know, email to email, you know, if you were interested. And so I got my wife to email it and I thought, "Well, you know, ain't no way I'll ever get picked." So when they called us and said, "We got a meetin' out at Atmos Building here." Between here and Midland. So when we got there all the veterans that were there that night, he said, "The good news is all of you that are here tonight is on the list to go."

Wow, that's great.

Daniel Frizzell: So that really made us thrilled, you know.

That's great. I think it'll be great, and I know the veterans service officer there in Ector County who's kind of leading all that up, right? He's the one in charge of it. Well, that is excellent. That's going to be a real thrill and something that's nice that they're able to do that.

Daniel Frizzell: Once in a lifetime thing.

Oh, yes sir. Yes sir. I was going to ask you then, sir, do you and wife have any children or grandchildren?

Daniel Frizzell: Man, we got so many of 'em we can't count 'em. When she and I married . . . I've got four daughters and she has a son and a daughter, and all of 'ems got kids except one of my daughters doesn't have any. Then we got great grandkids.

That's great.

Daniel Frizzell: We even won a contest at church one night because we had the most grandchildren and great grandchildren.

There will be a lot of people then who'll be able to hear your story about your trips to Washington then.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, everybody at our church is really supportive and helping. Some of 'em are even helping with it. We had a lot of people step forward and doing everything they can for us.

It's going to be a big deal. That's really a great, great thing. I was going to ask you too, sir, you talk about your kids. Did any of them ever talk to you or ask you very much about your time in the Navy?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. Yeah, I've told all of them about it. You know, if fact, I've got a picture of the USS Pensacola and two of my daughters was out here this weekend, this past weekend, and I showed 'em that picture. It's an awesome ship, I mean, they don't make 'em like that anymore.

That's true. Did you ever keep in touch with any of the sailors that you served with aboard the Pensacola?

Daniel Frizzell: No. The way we were moved after we left Bikini out there and put on troop ships, we went so many different ways. We weren't really on there long enough to really get that much bonding. I was shipped up, like I say, up to San Francisco and went on the USS Atlanta which is a heavy cruiser but not as big as the Pensacola. And I was on that until . . . I lost track. Had a couple of guys over the time we've lost track of each other.

I understand how that can happen.

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah.

Well sir, one thing that I forgot to mention to you before we started this call, is that we're going to send you copies of this interview in a couple of weeks. We're going to put them on CDs. I don't know if we'll have enough for us to give to everyone in your family but we'll send you four or five to start with. That way you can give them to your children or grandchildren if they're interested in keeping a copy of this interview.

Daniel Frizzell: That'll be great.

And we're also going to send a signed letter and certificate of appreciation from Commissioner Patterson. It's really just a small way of the State of Texas saying thank you to you for your service to our nation. It's a small token of gratitude. We take these interviews, like we're doing now, and we add them to our archives here at the Land Office. We have archives that go back to the 1700s. We have the original land grant that Davy Crockett's widow received after he was killed at the Alamo. We have the registro that Stephen F. Austin kept of all the original settlers that came to Texas. Our goal is for these interviews to be saved and potentially hundreds of years from now people can listen to them and study them and perhaps learn something from them.

Daniel Frizzell: I hope so and I hope we keep it in schools so the kids can learn it. To this day, I can still remember President Roosevelt on Monday morning when we went to school, they put a little radio on the stage and I can still remember that speech.

You had to have been about 11 years old or so?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah, yeah. Sure was.

That's right. Because December 7th, when Pearl Harbor was bombed, was a Sunday. So the next day he went to Congress and they declared war. That was in Orange, Texas?

Daniel Frizzell: No, we lived in Starks at that time.

Still in Starks.

Daniel Frizzell: Starks, Louisiana.

So you remember that day of them having . . . I guess you were at school, they had a radio out . . .

Daniel Frizzell: They had a full assembly in the auditorium and every teacher and every kid in that school was in that auditorium. They put that radio on the stage and we listened to it.

When you heard that, did you ever think that you yourself would be going into the military at some point?

Daniel Frizzell: Probably not at that time.

You were so young.

Daniel Frizzell: I can remember though we started to collecting scrap metal and buying 25 cent savings stamps. We'd get a quarter and we didn't buy candy, we bought a savings stamp.

Did you know anyone that did a victory garden? Grew a victory garden?

Daniel Frizzell: Well, my mother and daddy, we raised . . . Had three or four acres and we farmed everything on it.

So you already had that going on?

Daniel Frizzell: Yeah. That was part of living back then.

That's right. That's great. Well sir, I tell you, it's an honor to be able to talk to you about your experiences and your service to our nation. I'm just thrilled to hear that you're going to be able to do that honor flight in September. Probably we should talk to you again later on in the fall, after you've gone on that trip, because I think it would be interesting to hear what you thought of that trip and the sights that you got to see. From folks that I've talked to that have been on those before, they say that it's really done very well. It's well organized and they treat the veterans great and you'll get to really see a lot of just really great stuff there. All the memorials and monuments.

Daniel Frizzell: Takes a lots of work and we've got lots of people working. I'm helping when I can, on different things. It's an honor that y'all called me and selected me to be on this interview and I appreciate it and I appreciate the work y'all are doing.

It's our goal. Anybody else that you know that's a veteran in Texas, please have them contact us because that's how we get these interviews. And I know, like in your case, it's because of the veterans service officer out there asking me to send a bunch of cards out. He really wants us to try to interview everyone we can before you go on that honor flight. So if we can, we're going to try to do that.

Daniel Frizzell: It really is. Yeah, we got to pick up that card. I told my wife, I said, "Mail it. Probably won't ever hear from it." But we do appreciate it and you just don't know how much we appreciate all that y'all do.

Yes sir. Anybody that sends us a card we're going to figure out a way to get them interviewed. Like I said, sir, in just a couple of weeks or so, be looking for us to send you a package that's going to have all the CDs of this interview and the letters and certificate and all that. Again, it's just a small token of our appreciation from the State of Texas for your service.

Daniel Frizzell: I thank you very much.

Yes sir. Thank you, sir, and we'll talk to you again soon.

Daniel Frizzell: All right. We appreciate it and y'all have a good day.

Yes sir. Take care. Bye-bye.

Daniel Frizzell: Thank you.